

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH MAJOR GENERAL DAVID PERKINS,  
DIRECTOR, STRATEGIC EFFECTS, MULTINATIONAL FORCE-IRAQ VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM  
IRAQ TIME: 8:30 A.M. EST DATE: THURSDAY, MARCH 5, 2009

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LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG, (Office of the Secretary of Defense for  
Public Affairs): And welcome, sir, to the Bloggers Roundtable. So we'll go  
ahead and get started.

Hello, I'd like to welcome --

GEN. PERKINS: All right. Hi. How you doing?

LT. CRAGG: Good, sir. Good, sir.

I'm just going to do a little bit of intro and I'll turn it over to  
you, sir. Is that okay?

GEN. PERKINS: Yeah. Can you hear me fine? I'm on a speakerphone. Or  
should I just use the regular handset? LT. CRAGG: No, you sound fine. All the  
bloggers on the line, does he come through to you well?

Q Very clearly.

Q Lima Charlie.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, great. Let's get started.

Hello. I'd like to welcome you all to the Department of Defense's  
Bloggers Roundtable for Wednesday, March 4, 2009. My name is Lieutenant  
Jennifer Cragg with the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs  
and I'll be moderating our call today.

A note to the bloggers on the line: Please remember to clearly state  
your name and the organization you're with prior to your question.

With that, our guest today is Major General David Perkins. He's the  
director of Strategic Effects for MNF-I Iraq or Multinational Forces-Iraq.

Sir, I know you have a number of topics you're going to address, so I'm  
just going to turn it over to you if you'd like to start with an opening  
statement.

GEN. PERKINS: Yeah. I think I'll just outline a couple of the big things that have happened recently and sort of set the tone for what's going on here.

Obviously, since 1 January, the security agreement came into effect, so a dramatic change in really the way the authorities flow here in that all of our missions are done either with Iraqi security forces, partnering with them -- and they're all definitely approved by the government of Iraq. So we've had to make sure that we work in very close coordination with them, and we're not allowed to detain people without a warrant, an Iraqi warrant. They have to be turned over within 24 hours. So it really has pushed the sovereignty of the Iraqi government to the forefront.

We also are in the process of transitioning a lot of facilities and areas over to the government of Iraq. The Green Zone was transitioned to the government of Iraq on 1 January.

The palace was given back to the government of Iraq; Basra airport; an additional 30 areas and facilities. And so that is moving along fairly rapidly.

We also had -- the provincial elections on 31 January were held. This is the first time the Iraqi people have actually been able to vote for candidates. Before that it was a closed list, so you could only vote for a political party and then they would choose who would seat -- be seated in the various representative councils. This time, you could vote for the candidates. There were over 14,000 legally-registered candidates that participated for a little over 400 slots, so there's a lot of enthusiasm out there. And we had about 7 million Iraqis go out and vote.

I think you've all been following the news, and the president announced the way ahead in Iraq here recently, with regards to a couple of time lines; that being that all combat operations will cease 31 August, 2010. And the second point of all forces being withdrawn by 2011, that of course is in accordance with the security agreement.

So just in the last 60 days, we have had some very historic events which have had some very significant impacts here in Iraq. And I can tell you, on the whole, things are going quite well and these changes are for the better.

So that's where the last 60 days in review -- major, major events occurring. And I think, probably best if I just open it up to questions now.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir. Let's go ahead and get started with Spencer. Please go ahead, Spencer.

Q Hi. Thank you very much, General. This is Spencer Ackerman from the Washington Independent and attackerman.

I wanted to ask about a clarification for how combat operations will be conducted sort of strategically. Is it the case that up until 31 August 2010, you're still performing along a counterinsurgency mission? And if so, you talk about transitioning over to -- to bases. There's been sort of a general consensus at this point, I think, that population-centric counterinsurgency operations can't be done by commuting to the fight. How does, if the premise is correct that this is still a population-centric counterinsurgency fight, that factor into play with the transition of bases? GEN. PERKINS: Yeah, you know, that's a good point. You know, another part of the security agreement is that

the U.S. will be out of all cities by June of this year, and so we are in the process already. So I think what's important to understand is the strategy is not changing. There is still a counterinsurgency fight being waged. It's just that it's being fought by primarily the Iraqi security forces, and not the U.S.

So the method that the counterinsurgency is being dealt with, with regards to living amongst the population, securing the population, that is not changing. What's changing is who is doing that. And the change is being accomplished by the Iraqi security forces.

So I will tell you, in the most part, the U.S. has already withdrawn out of a lot of the cities. In fact, since the height of the surge, we have already reduced our forces by over 20 percent. So if you took a look at the number of the forces here at the surge, and take a look now, over a fifth of them have already gone home. In that same period, the Iraqi security forces have increased by at least 130,000. But I think what's important is not just the numbers, but their capabilities have increased.

And so this is not anything new to us. This is not something that's going to happen overnight. In fact, our downsizing started last year. We started reducing our forces -- again, reduced over 20 percent.

And at the same time, the number of violent attacks reduced at an even greater rate. Last year, we had weeks where we averaged over 190 attacks a day in Iraq; we now routinely have days where we have less than 10 attacks a day throughout Iraq.

So I think the model that we've been executing has proved to work fairly well, that as we move out the Iraqis move in. And I think it's also indicative to see that as the U.S. has begun a fairly dramatic withdrawal already -- I think most people don't realize how many forces we've already returned -- that the security incidences have come down at even a faster rate. So it makes the case that the Iraqis are stepping up to the plate. They are getting better at what they're doing. And it really gets us to the end state where the U.S. is pulled out of here by 2011 and then it is sustained by the Iraqi security forces.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Let's move on to Bruce.

Q Hey, General. Bruce McQuain -- (clears throat) -- excuse me -- with QandO.net and blackfive. Can you step us through the new process now of mission approval and how the detainee -- or how the warrants are gotten for the detention of particular detainees?

GEN. PERKINS: Yeah. There's a couple ways that we go through this. There's a joint military operation committee that is co-led with the minister of defense, General Odierno, General Austin -- a number of people sit on it -- that worked through some of these very, you know, technical and complicated issues, and that the process -- there's sort of multiple ways that we go about this.

One is that in many cases there is preapproval of missions based on target sets, based on activities, based on intelligence. We sit down with the Iraqi leaders and we discuss what are the operations that we want to conduct, who the targets are, what the goals and objectives are, discuss what U.S. forces'll take part, discuss what Iraqi forces will take part.

And then once that is determined, the way ahead, then there are a series of judges that we and the Iraqis work with to get warrants for specific targets and go through and execute that. And it's really working quite well. I mean, it's become a battle rhythm that we do.

Then there are other operations, for instance, where you will conduct an operation; from that operation you will get intelligence, which will drive you to further operations. And in cases where that occurs, we then have judges that we work with as well to sort of do a fast turn on getting warrants and/or getting approval from our Iraqi counterparts.

And so what we do is at the highest level lay out some of the types of missions, the types of targets, the types of operations, get approval for them. And then when we actually conduct the missions, we work with the local Iraqi commanders just as we would in a U.S. operation, that you want coordination taking part at the lowest level and make sure that, in most cases, we are partnering with an Iraqi unit, the?? local Iraqi commander is involved, and therefore if the mission leads to another follow-on mission, you've got the Iraqi commander right there who is authorized to approve it on the spot and move forward.

So it's a fairly complicated process, but it has worked out quite well.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Let's go ahead and move on to Greg Grant. Greg, please go ahead.

Q Yes, General. Greg Grant from military.com. I wonder if you could speak a bit about the advisory mission going forward and who would be carrying out that out. Are you going to have special units, advisory units, come in? Or will this be just that parts of the BCTs that are there will be chopped off to do that? I'm just kind of trying to get a sense of who's going to stick around and do the adviser portion.

GEN. PERKINS: Yes. Well, as I said before, you know, in -- at the end of August 2010, we'll cease all U.S. combat operations and then focus on the advising, coach, teach, mentor the Iraqi security forces.

What we are doing right now is that after the president made his decision just last week, we are going through a fairly rigorous planning process, both us here in Iraq, in conjunction with the Iraqi security forces, CENTCOM and the Joint Staff -- going through the analysis to determine exactly what is -- what does that transition force structure look like. As you heard, the president gave a fairly wide bandwidth there of possibilities -- 35,000 to 50,000. Of course most of that will be based on, you know, conditions on the ground, where we are then, where we see things going.

Obviously in the Army the unit of measurement is sort of a brigade combat team. And so I think one of the things you'll see is, we'll start looking at units that exist but then tailoring them, depending upon what enablers you need, what has to be done, because, you know, there's various aspects that we'll advise the Iraqis in. We right now are continuing to advise them in, you know, normal counterterrorism missions, kinetic missions, but we have a big push going on helping them with enablers, such as logistical support, intelligence support, reconnaissance support, signal support. And so of course we'll need specifically tailored units to focus on those things.

So what we are going through now is a planning process. Now that the president has made his decision, he's laid a timeline out there, he's given us mission requirements, it is very clear to us what the strategy is, and in fact that's exactly what we needed. We needed timelines. We needed guidance with regards to size of the force, guidance with regards to what missions, and now we are going through our mission analysis to determine exactly what forces we'd need to do that.

Q Do those specialized forces that you mentioned -- do they currently exist in the force structure? Is that something you'll have to create?

GEN. PERKINS: Well, we have units and personnel that come over here that are trained, you know, specifically for advising and training and teaching type things. So I think what you'll see is, we have seen historically -- is that we'll look to the units that we have in the military, figure out what we have to do to them to task organize them, as we do to every mission in the military.

We -- very rarely do we send a unit as it originally existed, say, at its home station, into any operation without task organizing it, without tailoring it to make sure that it can conduct the mission as well as be trained -- as train for it.

And I think an important point to keep in mind is, you know, people get hung up on, well, is it a combat mission or not a combat mission, therefore you have a combat soldier and a non-combat soldier. All soldiers are combat soldiers. They are trained to take part in combat. They are trained to defend themselves. The issue is really what mission do they have.

A case I like to use -- an example is I was a tank battalion commander, and so we had a tank battalion, a combat unit, but we were sent to Macedonia as part of a U.N. preventative deployment force and we conducted peacekeeping operations. So we had a combat-trained unit down there conducting a peacekeeping operation. So we didn't have a combat mission, but we did have rules of engagement which allowed for self defense. We had weapons. They were loaded. Thankfully, we never used them. So we were prepared to defend ourselves, yet we got specific training to focus on the missions that we had on hand.

So, again, we know how to do this. Many times, we have taken units that exist that have the advantage of coherent command and control; they have organic support for logistics, signal, communications, all those things you need to sustain yourselves; and then we focus on training specifically for the mission, as we do with units that are coming in combat right now. Every unit that comes into Iraq goes through a mission rehearsal exercise that focus specifically on the missions that they have here so that, again, they're sort of at the top of their game as they're coming in.

So that's the way that we'll approach this new mission of train, teach and mentor, just as we approached the mission as they come into combat.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Let's move on to CJ. Go ahead.

Q Good morning, sir. CJ Grisham from A Soldier's Perspective, SoldiersPerspective.us.

GEN. PERKINS: Hey, CJ. Q Sir, I don't know if you know, I was your -- you were my brigade commander in OIF 1 going into Baghdad, so --

GEN. PERKINS: Oh, well, how are you doing? Well, thanks for your service.

Q Thank you, sir. I guess my question is with the announcement of a timeline, the withdrawal of American troops, is there any -- is there any planning taking place to possibly deal with an increase or uptick in violence as we kind of lower our footprint? As you remember, during the Vietnam years, when we were pulling out, violence kind of escalated a little bit. How are we preparing for that?

GEN. PERKINS: Yeah. I got to tell you, that's really the focus of the planning that we're doing now with Iraqi security forces, because what we don't want to have is to leave a void and let somebody take advantage of this transition and lose any of the hard-fought gains that we have.

And so that's why there is such a focus even now on training and building up the capacity of the Iraqi security forces. And there is no intent whatsoever that the U.S. just turns and leaves any of these areas in Iraq that require security without an in-depth sort of relief-in-place plan with the Iraqi security forces. And that's what we're doing right now.

As I said, we've been doing it all last year. We've withdrawn over 20 percent of our force, but we've done it in a manner that we have Iraqi security forces coming behind this, sort of do a right-seat ride, left-seat ride, continue to provide overwatch, mentor them, hand off the area to them. And what has resulted, as I said, a 20 percent reduction in the U.S. force but a 90-percent reduction in violent attacks.

So we think that model works very well, and that is why we've stood up all these joint coordination committees. We have committees that focus on basing, we have committees that focus on rule of law, detainees, Green Zone security, all these things, so that it is as seamless as possible hand-over between the Iraqi security forces, and we still have forces left here to provide that overwatch.

And even, as the president outlined his plan, we'll be conducting combat operations here till August of 2010, which is over a year from now, and then when we stop combat operations, we'll have 30(,000) to 50,000 troops here until 31 December 2011. So again, over a year again -- over a year overlap with forces, again, to provide that teaching, coaching, mentoring, assisting them. So there is every intent to make sure this is done responsibly and so that we do not have a big gap in security apparatus.

Q Thank you, sir.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, let's move on to Paul, please. Go ahead, Paul.

Q Hi, General. Paul McLeary from DTI. You mentioned --

GEN. PERKINS: Hey, Paul.

Q How you doing. You mention that about 30 facilities have been handed over to the government of Iraq so far. And as we start drawing down and move out of the cities, are we moving back to the big bases? Are we still going to keep a lot of the JSSs and COPs that we set up during the surge? GEN.

PERKINS: Well, a lot of the JSSs and COPs and all that that are in the cities, what we are doing with them now is handing them over to the Iraqis so they are sort of the landlords, so to speak. They own it. We are a tenant unit. And then we'll continue to slowly withdraw out of them, so that by June of this year, we will be out of the cities. So by June of this year, those will just be Iraqi facilities. We will be out of the cities. We are working through with the government of Iraq now where we can put some of those forces.

We will still be able to do combat operations at the request of the Iraqi government, in coordination with the Iraqi security forces, but we will not have combat forces permanently stationed in the cities. That is going to be the role of the Iraqi security forces to do that. So again, we are not leaving those cops and JSS's. They are just going to be fully manned by Iraqi security forces, with us in support.

Q Thanks. Quick follow-up. So we're pulling back to the larger bases, then, is what you're saying? Because I know there's a lot of cops and JSS's out in the countryside as well.

GEN. PERKINS: Yeah. The ones out in the countryside, we may well continue to man those, because we do not have to be out of those by June. So our focus right now is moving out of the cities, moving the Iraqi security forces in, because that is the first sort of time line that we have to meet according to the security agreement. And so that is where our focus is right now, moving back in many cases to our larger FOBs. But also, understand that during that time we're going to continue to be downsizing.

Shortly here, we'll be announcing sort of our next set of reductions. And so as we move units out of Iraq and don't replace them, of course that just reduces our overall footprint here.

Q General, thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Okay, let's go around the horn just one more time. Let's go ahead and start with Spencer. Do you have any follow-up questions, Spencer?

Q Yes, if I could. One of the things that the president and the secretary of Defense has talked about is the increased role of diplomacy as our troops come down. I was wondering if you could talk a bit about what planning is in place to support diplomatic efforts outside of Baghdad, get diplomats out there? Will the PRTs stay in place? What's happening on that front with coordination with the embassy?

GEN. PERKINS: Yeah, that's a good part. Of note, I am sitting here in the embassy, talking to you; that I am the director of CJ-9, and my entire division is located in the U.S. embassy. And I work daily with all our embassy partners. And so it's, I think, unique in the world that we have -- we have over 200 military people here in the U.S. embassy that work day in and day out with them. And what we are doing as we go through this transition, it's not only diplomacy, but I have a whole section that works with their economic development. We work on education. We work on agricultural improvements. We work on political progress. We work on government. We had a big part in the elections. And so we are looking across all of our lines of operation, that as

we get the security situation under control, what we do is follow up behind that with progress across the board: essential services, oil development, electricity generation. We are now generating more electricity in Iraq than ever, historically, even well above pre-war levels.

So the success of holding onto our gains is not just by having, you know, a bunch of Iraqi security forces out there in joint security stations, but by bringing the things to the Iraqi people that they expect: security, electricity, sewer, water, good governance, political progress. And so it's a very comprehensive plan, not just security.

Q Can you talk a bit about the PRTs? Will they stay?

GEN. PERKINS: Yeah. The PRTs are a major portion of that. We work very closely with the PRTs. The PRTs have got additional funding. We work with a number of other agencies, such as USAID. We work very closely with the U.N. Development Fund, the International Monetary Fund. The World Bank is in here, helping to set up the banking structure, ATM capacity, all these things.

So we're bringing together all of these non-kinetic-type events, from not just the U.S. but the whole international community, because again the goal is that Iraq becomes a peaceful, productive neighbor, in this part of the world, and a peaceful, productive part of the world community. And so we need progress across all of these aspects of society.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Okay.

Bruce, do you have any follow-up questions?

Q Yeah.

General, one of the big disconnects a year or so ago was trying to get those lines built, between the national government and the provincial governments, in the budgeting process and all that stuff. How's that looking now?

GEN. PERKINS: Yeah. Well, I think, the good news is, as I said, 31 January, we had provincial elections across the entire country, where they could vote for actual candidates and not political blocs.

Almost in every single province, very few incumbents won. So what we're going to have here: The official results, the certified results will be announced 10 March. The provisional councils then have 15 days to seat their council and then 30 days to elect their new governor.

So we are going to have a series of new provincial councils and new governors, all across Iraq. And I think the message that was sent to them, by their constituents, is the one that you just put out, that they were very unhappy with the previous government, with the previous governors. They voted them out of office. And that's the way we want change to occur here in Iraq. When things aren't working properly, we don't want people to form militias and go attack ethnosectarian groups that are different from them or run to the streets with AK-47s.



We want them to solve their problems via ballots and not bullets. Go and vote the people out. And vote in people who are going to work on it. So I think the message has been very clear to the new, soon- to-be-seated provincial members that they probably need to figure out how they are going to work their budgets and provide for their provincial constituents.

LT. CRAGG: Okay.

Greg.

Q Yeah.

Quickly General, could you speak just a bit about new unit rotation? I mean, are you going to -- is the plan to continue rotating units in? Or is everyone kind of just heading for the doors at this point?

GEN. PERKINS: Well, what we are doing now is, we are in intensive planning process to sit down, now that we have the president's guidance. And we are doing mission analysis and a troop- to-task, working very closely with our Iraqi counterparts to take a good at, what is the situation on the ground?

What do we think al Qaeda is doing, other terrorists, special group criminals? What is their capability? Where are the areas they're operating in? Where do they have strongholds left? Where do they have freedom of maneuver?

Take a look at the capability of the Iraqi security forces. Where are they going to be next six months or so? What units are supposed to be coming in for the U.S. forces? What units are supposed to be going out? And give a comprehensive plan as to both the combination of U.S. units, Iraqi security units. How many do we need? Where do they need to go, and what are their missions? So that's part of our ongoing analysis right now.

Q Will there be changes to the already announced unit locations, do you expect?

GEN. PERKINS: I think what there will be is -- yes, we -- after this guidance given by the president, we will go through and make a series of decisions on units, types of units, what their mission is, what their rotation dates are and where they are located in Iraq.

Q All right. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. CJ?

Q Ah, yes, there's one more question. You talked a little bit about how diplomatic relations play a huge effort in this, and we know that historically there's been a lot of interference from neighboring countries that have tried to destabilize Iraq. What is being done, I guess more at the political level, to ensure that the neighboring countries, as we start to pull out, aren't going to try and make power plays to kind of control this transition?

GEN. PERKINS: Yeah. Well, the Iraqi government has been very active recently in going out and reaching out to their neighbors here in the Middle East, as has the U.S. embassy here. As you know, a number of Arab embassies have recently been stood up here. They're sending their ambassadors here. And we're starting to see foreign investment come in.

And so the Iraqis are very cognizant of the situation they're in. They have made multiple statements as to their desire to have normal bilateral relationships with its neighbors, based on commerce, trade, exchange of our cultural type things, education things. But they don't want them based on malign influence.

And so the prime minister has been very specific with Iran and other of its neighbors that have facilitated foreign terrorist flow, that have facilitated explosives coming into the country, and said that that will not stand. And so, for instance, the Iraqi government has put a lot of effort into its border security. Its Department of Border Enforcement is receiving additional training, additional forces. Significant emphasis has been placed on sort of sophisticated measures along the border for electronic surveillance.

So they are very, I think, aware that people may try to take advantage of this time and try to apply undue influence, and they're being vigilant about it both publicly, if you mark their statements, as well as their actions.

LT. CRAGG: Okay. Let's wrap up with Paul.

Q Hi, General. General Odierno recently announced that he wanted to draw down the number of contractors working in Iraq, foreign contractors, and hand off some of those jobs to Iraqis. The contractors are pretty well embedded within the, you know, U.S. military institution in Iraq. And how -- are there plans afoot to start training Iraqis to do these jobs?

GEN. PERKINS: Yeah. Two parts to that is -- obviously, as our forces draw down, we just don't need those contractors anymore because we don't have as many people to feed, we don't use as much fuel, we don't have as many vehicles to maintain, all that. So it's logical that as our force structure comes down, our footprint comes down, we don't need all these contractors. A vast majority of them provide logistical support. So our logistical requirements come down. So I think that's only going to be natural that your logistical support comes down as your size of your force comes down.

The other initiative we have out there is, as you said, we are focusing heavily on hiring Iraqis to perform jobs here in Iraq. We have Iraqi First, IBIZ, which is a program to start up Iraqi businesses to perform the missions we have to have in Iraq, for a number of reasons: One, many times it generates significant cost savings to actually have Iraqis do it, because they're here in country. Two, it provides significant economic stimulus to the economy, which it badly needs. And three, it keeps Iraqis employed -- gainfully employed so that they are not easy targets for terrorists to recruit to put in IEDs and all that. So there's a cost savings to the American taxpayer, there is stimulus to the economy and there is job training for the Iraqi people that take part in this.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you. That looks like all the bloggers had a chance to ask one question or two questions for you, sir.

I'm going to turn it back over to you, sir, if you want to end with a closing statement.

GEN. PERKINS: Well, again, I just appreciate your time today to take part in this discussion. Hopefully it provided some insight into what's going on here in Iraq. A very historic time, which -- probably every time in Iraq

that we've been here, every year has been historic, but this one I think is historic in that we are seeing unprecedented progress. I'm -- not to minimize the challenges out there; there are many challenges that remain. The low price of oil is going to put budgetary pressures on the Iraqis. So they have to deal with that. But that actually may force them to make some tough decisions that need to be made with regards to how they structure their economy. There are internal issues, Arab-Kurd issues which, again, with our reduction in attacks here, allows the Iraqis to focus on a political settlement to that.

And there are still the lingering issues with al Qaeda, terrorism, special-group criminals. But I think the important thing to see is that, by and large, the Iraqi population has rejected that bankrupt philosophy. Very hard for them to get the passive support that is so necessary for a counterinsurgency to exist. And it is allowing the Iraqi security forces to step up and take the lead and provide for their own security, which is what all of us want to have Iraq be able to do in the future.

So with that, again, I just thank you all for your great questions and look forward to doing this again in the future.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir.

And a note for everybody on the line, today's program will be available online on the bloggers link on defenselink, so -- where you'll be able to access a story based on today's call along with the audio file as well as the transcript.

Again, thank you, sir, for joining us today, and thank you for the bloggers on the line. Have a great day.

GEN. PERKINS: Thanks. You all have a good day as well.

Q Thanks very much.

END.